

The Madness of Making Sense: Madness and Integrative Knowledge

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Abstract

Madness implies a radically different view on the world than the common sense - radically different and beyond the verge of what can be called real, rational, accurate. Madness implies perceiving other sides of the given reality, sides that very often remain, for the rest of us, hidden, obscured, un-obvious. Consequent to this particular un-usual perception, madness also implies an understanding of these perceptions and an adequate expression of them. The reason why madness is kept into a closed system of queerness and meaninglessness might be the very coherence that exists between all these mind functions - perception, understanding and expression - for the mad person.

Madness can be seen as a particular kind of perceptual awareness, a sense for the paradoxical dimension of the world. Whereas a “healthy” mind lives undisturbed by frequent contradictions and loops which characterize commonsensical reasoning, madness functions as a type of knowledge adapted to dealing and going beyond inconsistency and imprecision. Therefore, studying madness complements the understanding of how the mind and consciousness work, and questions the limits of representation and communication.

Key Words: knowledge, madness, representation, experience.

1. Introduction

Madness is a wide comprising term, which can refer to subject matters varying from creativity and innovation to excess, distortion, violence and suffering. This paper will refer strictly to the connection between madness and knowledge: how can we know about madness and what does madness teach us about human nature?

Far from endorsing a sentimental or idealizing view on madness, what we claim is that, from an anthropological point of view, it is both unconstructive to try and impossible to succeed in delineating a precise and fair border between originality/authenticity and madness. The lack of a reliable authority or appropriate criteria prevents us from attaining such precision. But instead of emphasizing discrepancies, we could learn from and about madness, through appeasing the conflict between folly and normality, by focusing on what is common to them both. Eventually, this focus on their overlapping parts takes us further into

exploring what it is to be human, by accepting the variations between individuals, without seeing an inherent conflict in it.

2. What is Madness?

2.1. Madness through History of Ideas and Mentalities – Short Contextual Description of the Madness-Knowledge Link

Madness is neither a recent thing, nor a recent interest for society. Depending on time period, cultural background or disciplinary perspective, madness was what people liked, chose or happened to make of it, never defined, never exhausted. Nowadays it might get more scientific attention than ever and more social assistance, whereas the past was ascribing to it a spiritual importance.

In the Greek culture, the figure of the god Apollo reflects a mentality, which does not exclude madness from knowledge, but quite the opposite. The god of light and reason is also the god of prophecy and poetry, both of which require being “out of one’s mind”, being possessed by the god, inspired, etc. The poetic creation and the gift of prophecy were both regarded as sign of being in touch with fundamental truths, of seeing beyond past or future. An un-ordinary perspective on the world would be two-sided: mad for the society but sacred, close to the realm of the divine knowledge.

In Phaedrus, Plato praises four states of madness, which he says, permits man to access the realm of the unseen. These four are: (1) the poetic, which grants knowledge of past deeds and events; (2) the prophetic, which allows seeing the future; (3) the telestic, the mystical knowledge; and (4) the erotic, the absolute knowledge.

‘Madness is superior to a sane mind (sophrosyne) for the one is only of human, but the other of divine origin [...] But he who having no touch of the Muses’ madness in his soul, comes to the door and thinks that he will get into the temple by the help of art – he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted; the sane man disappears and is nowhere when he enters into rivalry with the madman.’¹

In a certain measure, the madman remains an outsider, but still he is surrounded with a certain aura of respect and awe, for madness remains a sine qua non condition for superior knowledge and privileged being.

Un-usual states of consciousness, such as visions, dreams, epilepsy, were considered the sign of a connection to the divine.² Madness had those days its own place and function in the society; it was integrated, accepted as human and as part of the community.

This privileged status of madness in the Antiquity is somehow obstructed in the Middle Ages, when the figure of the mad person takes the place left empty in the society by the eradication of leprosy.³ The mad becomes the persona non grata, and he is now regarded with fear, treated with cruelty and contempt.

However, in the mind frame of the Middle Ages, with an extensive taste for the fantastic worlds and legendary characters, delusional madness might have found an integrating place. In a world in which symbolic, esoteric knowledge was playing such a great role, madness wouldn't have been regarded as lack of meaning, but as hiding a deeper meaning.

This double attitude towards madness and folly oscillating between fear and fascination continued until madness became a scientific fact. With psychiatry, madness becomes the object of systematic research under the neutral eyes of science, a domain in search of results and of cures.

2.2. Us and Madness

What is madness for us nowadays? The specialized publications in psychiatry become more and more detailed, but also more and more comprising. Madness is not reserved to sick people anymore, but all of us seem to be predisposed to it, or have at least some behavioral or psychological tendencies towards one or the other psychiatric disturbance. We fell in depression, we show sometimes signs of obsessive compulsory disorder, the percentage of children with autism or ADHD grows dramatically in schools. This situation has maybe its own positive side in the effect of reducing the distance between us - the healthy and *the others* - the mad people - thus bringing us a step further towards the reintegration of the people who suffer from these disorders.

So, in virtue of all the aspects emphasized so far, madness in a certain sense is part of us, is a present issue in our society. It relates to us directly through our own experiences or those of our close friends. So we ask ourselves what would be the right way to relate to madness? What is the paradigm in which we judge and consider madness as such? What are the borders and criteria, which confer credibility and authority to mentalities and opinions about madness? In the light of the main topic of this paper - the knowledge-madness link – we will point some mad aspects of what we consider knowledge and some aspects of madness that reflect great sensibility and knowledge. We will discuss some preconceptions about commonsense and knowledge, which limit and condition contemporary attitudes and actions concerning madness.

3. What is Knowledge for Us?

3.1. Scientific Paradigm – Some Problematic Aspects

In our contemporary society, knowledge is inextricably linked with science and the academic community. Science has its foundations, its principles: rigor, logic, proof, objectivity, etc., but also its assumptions, axioms, borders and loops. In this context, madness is what falls each time outside of these borders. We'll show further on why the traditional attributes of good science remain more or less just a myth. So how reliable are they, the big and small axioms of scientific thinking, and how can we determine this?

A very good point concerning this issue is the one of Douglas Hofstadter *Metamagical Themas Questing for the Essence of Mind and Pattern* - what scientific truth relies on is commonsense. A common sense regarding what is real, about cause-effect relations happening in time, about materiality and mass, about deductive argumentation, about a binary truth-value logical system, something being either true or false, etc. However, when analyzed in detail, all these concepts are problematic.

The so-called commonsense, which is '*a subjective art more than objective science*'⁴ has in its defense that it is functional, that it gives results. But those results seem so meaningful just because they are considered inside the same commonsensical paradigm in which they had been obtained.

There are so many examples in the history of science when axioms, once taken as firm reliable foundation, are reconsidered and finally given up for a quite opposite view. Consequently, parts of what once was considered to be madness are reintegrated into good science. Axioms such as Euclid's postulate, very intuitive, which for a long time had been taken for granted by both mathematicians and lay-people, says that from a point we can never trace more than one parallel to a given line (see Fig.1).



Fig.1: Euclid Geometry.

When new hyperbolic and elliptic geometries were invented, by Riemann and Lobachevski, this obvious commonsensical foundation of geometry became nothing more than a particular case of curved metric spaces (see Fig.2).

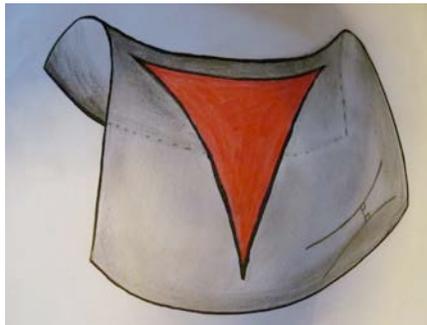


Fig.2: Riemann and Lobachevski Geometry.

Nowadays, it is acknowledged that these geometries describe better the universe's laws than the Euclidean one. Similarly, so many breakthroughs are not just counterintuitive, but even, un-elegant and very complicated, all three of these

attributes - elegance, simplicity and intuitiveness - being considered by some as marks of rational, correct proofs.

Moreover mathematics is not all about finding, but mainly about inventing, imagining mathematical objects, theorems and demonstrations. - Abstractions that end up being employed in useful applications in the concrete world. A domain, which doesn't aim at describing reality, mathematics deals with non-real objects, objects that at first appear to have no correspondence with the real world, but eventually prove to have. Octonions for example, which are the fourth algebra, after real numbers, complex numbers and quaternions, invented in 1843 by John T. Graves with no practical connection to the world at the time, have now applications in quantum mechanics.⁵

Apart from practical results in technology and elsewhere, the other main advocacy for scientific knowledge is experiment, as reliable methodology. In physics and biology and all natural sciences, we talk about experiment and falsifiability. In an experiment, there are certain rules to be respected, but also unpredictability and randomness to keep under control.

However, no matter how many measures of precaution are taken, an experiment will ultimately be a matter of interpretation.⁶ Very often, the agreement between scientists who deal with the same issue is just an appearance, when in fact that problem should still be in discussion.⁷ The successful, accepted views are sometimes the most spectacular, but not necessarily the best scientific explanations, or the correct ones. Moreover, something being functional at some point doesn't guarantee that the solution is the correct one. It can be a temporary one, a happy mistake or as it so often happens in science, a particular case of a broader problem, which requires in fact the opposite approach to be un-riddled.⁸

3.2. The Madness of Knowledge and the Sense of Madness

Without getting too much into a positivism-constructivism debate, we have to admit that most evident things, such as the existence of objects, are impossible to prove, at least existence in the classical sense.

There are so many features of reality, which go beyond our perceptual capabilities. Madness, in some of its forms, functions as an indicator of other aspects of this world, for which we have not yet developed appropriate receptors, language, and systems of representation.

But is there any commonsense at all in what is to be understood by existence, matter or time? Our commonsensical sane perceptions are contradicted by new cosmological or physical theories. Again, at our scale, classical concepts of time and matter still make sense, are still functional, but at a more essential level, they couldn't be more wrong. Time depends on speed, and can be warped by gravitation. Notions such as simultaneity or consequence change their meaning, shaking the firm and secure ground of our intuitions.

We are very familiar with distinctions such as mind-world, objectivity-subjectivity, etc. However, these distinctions do not hold anymore as absolute. It is hard to conceive nowadays a mind as a separate entity from the world. It's not just a socio-cultural context which shapes the mind, but also the genetic code we inherit, also the chemistry and electrical impulses at the level of neurons that makes us, seen at a bigger scale, indistinguishable from an outside world. The inside and outside listen to the same fundamental laws of reality – a reality in 11 dimensions, built from wave-corpuscule particles and antiparticles. At this level, we don't work anymore with existent objects, but with a rate of probability, like in the famous Schrodinger Cat's paradox - there are moments in the experiment when the cat is considered both alive and dead. Energy and mass are convertible into each other. In computer science and Artificial Intelligence, we don't work anymore with traditional logic values like true or false, but with approximations. It is quite true then that this world couldn't get much madder than this.

Couldn't we then explain true madness as the translation to the existential level of these absurd counterintuitive but true universal laws that we don't quite manage to instantiate at a personal inner level of existence? Because we unconsciously maintain a fragrant contradiction between what we understand and what we perceive, between what we think and what we are.

So it seems that “sane” knowledge has some characteristics, which are not at all obvious to us, those who live inside the paradigm dictated by it. Madness functions, therefore, as an indicator of the hyper-fragmentation/“sickness” present in the contemporary knowledge systems. Madness - we all share.

In his anthropological study about madness, Jonathan Burns concludes that madness must be just another word for humanity. *‘The same “genes” that drive us mad have made us human.’*⁹

4. Art, the Translator

The postmodern world is contaminated with an excess of sense and meaning, which resembles quite a lot to the lack of any meaning - we move and live into hyper-realities.¹⁰ The appearance of one and only common sense comes from the fact that we don't have the overall picture of the universe anymore, we just deal with small portions, we work on small areas, we apply specific methods and principles. And to this level they appear to hold. What we got is small islands of sense in a sea of ever-changing meaning full reality.

There are many possible representations for a subject matter, each of it having its limits and its inadvertences, being in a certain sense incorrect and incomplete. To make sense of the world, we see things where they are not, we reconstruct, we create on top of the meaningless - the meaningful. We take David out of the marble; we take out the formed, out of the formless. We make sense out of randomness. Is it hallucination or creativity?

Art takes to the level of experience the madness of knowledge and completes its meaning. Through scientific theories, we represent the world. Through art

creation and reception, we re-become present in our representations. This can happen, because madness is itself a form of art. Madness often hurts our common sense through excess, intensity, controversy and integrative power of meaning. This is where it shares grounds with the arts and mystic experiences. What madness, art and religion have in common is a way of making a line of continuity between understanding and living.

Craziness might imply an experience of the world, which is not fragmented but continuous at the level of perception, conception and expression. For a mad person, the world can't be a simple representation but a rich experience, which is then expressed in a symbolic language we cannot completely understand. Also art and religion are lived knowledge, embodied knowledge.¹¹ An artist in a dance performance won't separate the feeling of space and time from the inner understanding of these concepts; a Tibetan monk will live accordingly to his reflections, accordingly to his philosophical but also existential experience.

Madness is regarded as a strange anomaly when confronted with statistical truth. But when confronted with absolute truth, philosophical truth, madness is part of it, is essential.

5. Conclusion

The commonsensical knowledge paradigm is built upon culturally and genetically given existential axioms, and represents just one from infinitely many other possible openings towards the world. Beyond such axioms, in the realm of madness, other paradigmatic configurations spring - with new reference points new solutions appear, and here lies the big creative power of madness.

Madness is the domain where paradox is accepted, expressed and lived, through participation, interpretation, or play of our own representations of the world.¹² It is like an artistic language, capable of making sense inside of a meaningful playful universe, transgressing the void of representation, towards the completeness of presence. What could be madder than making just one sense (a common sense) when there are so many other possible?

Notes

¹ Plato, *Phaedrus* (Project Gutenberg. Viewed on 15 June, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1636/1636-h/1636-h.htm>), 44a-257b.

² E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 66-67.

³ Michel Foucault and Jean Khalifa, *History of Madness* (London: Routledge, 2006), 10-14.

⁴ Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Metamagical Themas Questing for the Essence of Mind and Pattern* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 96.

- ⁵ Geoffrey M. Dixon, *Division Algebras: Octonions Quaternions Complex Numbers and the Algebraic Design of Physics* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 13.
- ⁶ Deborah G. Mayo, *Error and the Growth of Experimental Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 214-218.
- ⁷ Michael Mulkay and G. Nigel Gilbert, "Accounting for Error: how Scientists Construct Their Social World when They Account for Correct and Incorrect Belief," *Sage Journals*, vol. 16, no. 2, (1982): 165-183. Viewed on 16 October, 2014. doi: 10.1177/0038038582016002001.
- ⁸ Gerd Gigerenzer, "I Think, therefore I Err - Errors, Consequences of Big Mistakes in the Natural and Social Sciences," *Social Research*, vol. 72, no. 1, (2005): 195-200.
- ⁹ Jonathan Burns, *The Descent of Madness Evolutionary Origins of Psychosis and the Social Brain* (London: Routledge, 2007), 181.
- ¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
- ¹¹ Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).
- ¹² Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1990).

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